

THE NIGHT RUN OF THE "OVERLAND"

*A STORY OF DOMESTIC LIFE AMONG
THE RAILROAD PEOPLE*

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IT snowed. The switch-lamps at Valley Junction twinkled faintly through the swirling flakes. A broad band of light from the night-operator's room shot out into the gloom, and it, too, was thickly powdered. Aside from this, the scattered houses of the little hamlet slept in darkness—all save one.

Through the drawn curtains of a cottage which squatted in the right angle formed by the intersecting tracks, a hundred yards or more from the station, a light shone dully. Inside, a young woman with a book in her

lap sat beside a sick-bed. On the bed lay a young man of perhaps thirty.

They were not an ordinary couple, nor of the type which prevailed in Valley Junction. The rugged strength of the man, which shone through even the pallor of sickness, was touched and softened by an unmistakable gentleness of birth, and the dark eyes which rested motionless upon the further wall, were thoughtful and liquid with intelligence. The young woman was yet more striking. Her loose gown, girdled at the waist with a tasseled cord, only half concealed the sturdy, sweeping lines of the form beneath. Her placid, womanly face was crowned with a glorious mass of burnished auburn hair. Her blue eyes, now fixed solicitously upon her husband's face, were dark with what seemed an habitual earnestness of purpose, and her sweet mouth drooped seriously. After a moment, though, she shook off her pensive mood. "What are you thinking of, dear?" she asked with a brightening face.

"Of you," answered her husband gravely, tightening his grasp upon the hand she had

slipped into his. "Comparing your life in this wretched place, Sylvia, with what it was before I married you; and thinking of that wonderful thing called 'love,' which can make you content with the change."

The young woman bent forward with a little spasmodic movement, and laid her beautiful hair upon the pillow beside her husband's dark strands. For a little she held herself in a kind of breathless tension, her hand upon his further temple, her full, passionate lips pressed tight against his cheek.

"Not content, my heart's husband, but happy!" she whispered, ecstatically. After a moment she lifted herself and quietly smoothed her ruffled hair. "I mustn't do that again," she said, demurely. "The doctor said you were not to be excited. I guess I won't allow you to think any more on that subject, either," she added, with pretty tyranny. "Only this, Ben—papa will forgive us some day. He's good. Just give him time. Some day you'll put away your dear, foolish pride, and let me write to him, and tell him where we are—no matter if he did forbid it. And he'll write back,

take my word for it, and say, 'Come home, children, and be forgiven.' But whether he does or not, I tell you, sweetheart, I would sooner flutter about this little dovecote of ours, and ride on the engine with you on bright days, than be mistress of the finest palace papa's money can build."

For a moment the pair looked the love they could not speak. Then the spell was broken by the distant scream of a locomotive, half-drowned in the howling wind. Sylvia glanced at the clock.

"There's the 'Overland,'" she murmured. "She's three minutes late. The wind is dead against her. Some day, dear," she added, fondly, "you will hold the throttle of that engine, if you want to, and I shall be the proudest girl in the land."

With a fine unconscious loyalty to the corporation which gave them bread and butter, they listened in silence to the dull roar of the on-coming train. But instead, a moment later, of the usual thunderous burst as the train swept by, and the trembling of earth, they heard the grinding of brake-shoes, the whistle of the air, and then, in

the lull which followed, the thumping of the pump, like some great, excited heart. At this unexampled occurrence, the sick man threw his wife a startled glance, and she sprang to the front window and drew back the curtain. She was just turning away again, still unsatisfied, when there came a quick, imperative rap at the door. Instantly connecting this rap with the delayed train, Sylvia flung the door wide open, revealing three men, the foremost of whom she recognized as the night-operator at the Junction.

"Mrs. Fox," he began with nervous haste, "this is the general superintendent, Mr.——"

"My name is Howard, madam," said the official for himself, unceremoniously pushing forward. "We are in trouble. Our engineer had a stroke of apoplexy fifteen miles back, and I want your husband to take this train. I know he's sick, but——"

"But he's too sick, sir, to hold his head up!" Sylvia exclaimed aghast.

"What's the trouble?" called Fox sharply, from his bed.

An instant's hush fell over the little group

at the door, and then they all, as if moved by one impulse, filed quickly back to the sick-room.

"Mr. Fox, I hate to ask a sick man to get out of bed and pull a train," began the general superintendent hurriedly, before Sylvia could speak. "But we're tied up here hard and fast, with not another engineer in sight; and every minute that train stands there the company loses a thousand dollars. If you can pull her through to Stockton, and will, it will be the best two hours' work that you ever did. I will give you five hundred dollars."

Fox had at first risen to his elbow, but he now sank back, dizzy and trembling from weakness. In a moment, though, he was up again. "I can't do it. Mr. Howard! I'm too sick!" he exclaimed, bitterly. "If it weren't a physical impossibility—if I weren't too dizzy to hold my head up——"

He broke off abruptly, and pressed his hand in a dazed way to his brow. Then he fixed his excited eyes upon his wife. The other men followed his gaze, plainly regarding him as out of his head. But Sylvia

turned pale, and leaned against the wall for support. She had caught her husband's meaning.

"She'll take the train, sir!" exclaimed Fox, eagerly; "and she'll take it through safe. She knows an engine as well as I, and every inch of the road. Sylvia, you must go. It is your duty."

The superintendent, staggered at this amazing proposition, gasped, and stared at the young woman. She stood with her dilated eyes fastened upon her husband, her chest rising and falling, and blood-red tongues of returning color shooting through her cheeks. Yet even in that crucial moment, when her little heart was fluttering like a wounded bird, something in Sylvia's eye—something hard and stubborn—fixed the skeptical superintendent's attention, and he drew a step nearer. Sylvia, with twitching nostrils and swelling throat, turned upon him almost desperately.

"I will go," she said, in a low, resigned voice. "But some one must stay here with him."

"This young man will attend to all that,

never fret," cried Howard gaily, in his relief, turning to the night-operator.

Whatever doubts the superintendent may have harbored yet of the fair engineer's nerve and skill were plainly removed when Sylvia returned from an inner room, after an absence of scarcely sixty seconds. An indomitable courage was stamped upon her handsome features, and she bore herself with the firm, subdued mien of one who knows the gravity of her task, yet has faith in herself for its performance. One of her husband's caps was drawn tightly over her thick hair. She had slipped into a short walking-skirt, and as she advanced she calmly but swiftly buttoned her jacket. Without hesitation, she stepped to the bedside and kissed her husband good-by.

"Be brave, girl!" he said encouragingly, though his own voice shook. "You have got to make seventy-five miles an hour, or better; but you've got the machine to do it with. Give her her head on all the grades except Four Mile Creek—don't be afraid!—and give her a little sand on Beechtree Hill. Good-by—and God keep you!"

As Sylvia stood beneath the great black hulk of iron and steel which drew the "Overland"—compared with which her husband's little local engine was but a toy—and glanced down the long line of mail, express, and sleeping-cars, laden with human freight, her heart almost failed her again. The mighty boiler towered high above her in the darkness like the body of some horrible antediluvian monster, and the steam rushed angrily from the dome, as though the great animal were fretting under the unaccountable delay, and longed again to be off on the wings of the wind, rending the tempest with its iron snout, and awakening the sleeping hills and hollows with its hoarse shriek.

"You are a brave little woman," she heard the superintendent saying at the cab-step. "Don't lose your nerve—but make time whatever else you do. Every minute you make up is money in the company's pocket, and they won't forget it. Besides," he added, familiarly, "we've got a big gun aboard, and I want to show him that a little thing like this don't frustrate *us* any. If you

draw into Stockton on time, I'll add five hundred dollars to that check! Remember that." And he lifted her up to the cab.

The fireman, a young Irishman, stared at Sylvia as she stepped into the cab as though she were a banshee; but she made no explanations, and, after a glance at the steam and the water gauges, climbed up to the engineer's high seat. The hand she laid upon the throttle-lever trembled slightly—as well it might; the huge iron horse quivered and stiffened, as if bracing itself for its task; noiselessly and imperceptibly it moved ahead, expelled one mighty breath, then another and another, quicker and quicker, shorter and shorter, until its respirations were lost in one continuous flow of steam. The "Overland" was once more under way.

The locomotive responded to Sylvia's touch with an alacrity which seemed almost human, and which, familiar though she was with the work, thrilled her through and through. She glanced at the time-table. They were twelve minutes behind time. The twenty miles between the Junction and Graf-

ton lay in a straight, level line. Sylvia determined to use it to good purpose, and to harden herself at once—as, indeed, she must—to the dizzy speed required by the inexorable schedule. She threw the throttle wide open, and pushed the reverse-lever into the last notch. The great machine seemed suddenly animated with a demoniac energy, and soon they were shooting through the black, storm-beaten night like an avenging bolt from the hand of a colossal god. The headlight—so dazzling from in front, so insufficient from behind—danced feebly ahead upon the driving cloud of snow. But that was all. The track was illuminated for scarcely fifty feet, and the night yawned beyond like some engulfing abyss. Sylvia momentarily closed her eyes and prayed that no unfortunate creature—human or brute—might wander that night between the rails.

The fireman danced attendance on the fire, watching his heat and water as jealously as a doctor might watch the pulse of a fevered patient. Now the furnace-door was closed, now it hung on its latch; now, it was closed

again, and now, when the ravenous maw within cried for more coal, it was flung wide open, lighting the driving cloud of steam and smoke above with a spectral glare.

Sylvia worked with the fireman with a fine intelligence which only the initiated could understand; for an engine is a steed whose speed depends upon its driver. She opened or closed the injector, to economize heat and water, and eased the steam when it could be spared. Thus together they coaxed, cajoled, threatened, and goaded the wheeled monster until, like a veritable thing of life, it seemed to strain every nerve to do their bidding, and whirled them faster and faster. Yet, as they flashed through Grafton—scarcely distinguishable in the darkness and the storm—they were still ten minutes behind time. Sylvia shut her lips tightly. If it was necessary to defy death on the curves and grades ahead, defy death she would.

The sticky snow on her glass now cut off Sylvia's vision ahead. It mattered little, for her life and the lives of the sleeping passengers behind were in higher hands than hers, and only the All-seeing Eye could see that

night. Another train ahead, an open switch, a fallen rock or tree—one awful crash, and the engine would become a gridiron for her tender flesh, while the palatial cars behind, now so full of warmth and light and comfort, would suddenly be turned into mere shapeless heaps of death. Yet Sylvia cautiously opened her door a little, and held it firmly against the hurricane while she brushed off the snow. At the same time she noticed that the headlight was burning dim.

"The headlight is covered with snow!" she called to the fireman.

The young fellow instantly drew his cap tighter, braced himself, and swung open his door. At the first cruel blast, the speed of which was that of the gale added to that of the train, he closed his eyes and held his breath; then, taking his life in his hands, he slipped out upon the wet, treacherous running-board of the pitching locomotive, made his way forward, and cleared the glass. Sylvia waited with bated breath until his head appeared in the door again.

"Fire up, please!" she exclaimed, nervously, for the steam had fallen off a pound.

As the twinkling street-lamps of Nancyville came into view, Sylvia blew a long blast. But there was no tuneful reverberation among the hills that night, for the wind, like some ferocious beast of prey, pounced upon the sound and throttled it in the teeth of the whistle. The Foxes shopped in Nancyville—they could shop fifty miles from home as easily as fifty rods—and the town, by comparison with Valley Junction, was beginning to seem like a little city to Sylvia. But tonight, sitting at the helm of that transcontinental train, which burst upon the town like a cyclone, with a shriek and a roar, and then was gone again all in a breath, she scarcely recognized the place; and it seemed little and rural and mean to her, a mere eddy in the world's great current.

One-third of the one hundred and forty-nine miles was now gone, and still the "Overland" was ten minutes behind, and it seemed as if no human power could make up the time. They were winding through the Tallahula Hills, where the road was as crooked as a serpent's trail. The engine jerked viciously from side to side, as if

angrily resenting the pitiless goading from behind, and twice Sylvia was nearly thrown from her seat. The wheels savagely ground the rails at every curve, and made them shriek in agony. One side of the engine first mounted upward, like a ship upon a wave, then suddenly sank, as if engulfed. One instant Sylvia was lifted high above her fireman, the next dropped far below him.

Yet she dared not slacken speed. The cry of "Time! Time! Time!" was dinned into her ears with every stroke of the piston. Her train was but one wheel—nay, but one cog on one wheel—in the vast and complicated machine of transportation. Yet one slip of that cog would rudely jar the whole delicate mechanism from coast to coast. Indeed, in Sylvia's excited fancy, the spirit of world-wide commercialism seemed riding on the gale above her, like Odin of old in the Wildhunt, urging her on and on.

Something of all this was in the mind of the fireman, too, in a simpler way; and when he glanced at his gentle superior from time to time, as she clung desperately to the arm-rest with one hand and clutched the reverse-

lever with the other, with white, set face, but firm mouth and fearless eye, his blue eyes flashed with a chivalric fire.

The train dashed into Carbondale, and Sylvia made out ahead the glowing headlight of the east-bound train, side-tracked and waiting for the belated "Overland," her engineer and conductor doubtless fuming and fretting. For the first time during the run Sylvia allowed a morbid, nervous fear to take hold of her. Suppose the switch were open! She knew that it *must* be closed, but the sickening possibility presented itself over and over again, with its train of horrors, in the brief space of a few seconds. She held her breath and half closed her eyes as they thundered down upon the other train; and when the engine lurched a little as it struck the switch, her heart leaped into her mouth. The suspense was mercifully short, though, for in an instant, as it were, they were past the danger, past the town, and once more scouring the open country.

In spite of the half-pipe of sand which she let run as they climbed Beechtree Hill—the last of the Tallahulas—it seemed to Sylvia

as if they would never reach the summit and as if the locomotive had lost all its vim. Yet the speed was slow only by contrast, and in reality was terrific; and the tireless steed upon whose high haunch Sylvia was perched was doing the noblest work of the night. At last, though, the high level of the Barren Plains was gained, and for forty miles—which were reeled off in less than thirty minutes—they swept along like an albatross on the crest of a gale, smoothly and almost noiselessly in the deadening snow.

Sylvia suspected that the engine was doing no better right here than it did every night of the year, and that when on time. Yet when she glanced from the time-table to the clock, as they clicked over the switch-points of Melrose with a force which seemed sufficient to snap them off like icicles, she was chagrined to discover that they were still eight minutes behind. They were now approaching the long twelve-mile descent of Four Mile Creek, with a beautiful level stretch at the bottom through the Spirit River Valley. Sylvia came to a grim de-

termination. Half a dozen times previously she had wondered, in her unfamiliarity with heavy trains and their magnificent speed, if she were falling short of or exceeding the safety limit; and half a dozen times she had been on the point of appealing to the fireman. But her pride, even in that momentous crisis, had restrained her; and, moreover, the time-table, mutely urging her faster and faster, seemed answer enough. But just before they struck the grade, the responsibility of her determination—contrary, too, to her husband's advice—seemed too much to bear alone.

"I am going to let her have her head!" she cried out, in her distress.

The fireman did not answer—perhaps he did not hear—and, setting her teeth, Sylvia assumed the grim burden alone. The ponderous locomotive fell over the brow of the hill, with her throttle agape, and the fire seething in her vitals with volcanic fury. Then she lowered her head like a maddened bull in its charge. The long, heavy train, sweeping down the sharp descent, might fitly have been likened to some winged dragon

flying low to earth, so appallingly flightlike was the motion. It seemed to Sylvia as though they dropped down the grade as an aërolite drops from heaven—silent, irresistible, awful, touched only by the circumambient air.

All Sylvia's familiar methods of gauging speed were now at fault, but she believed that for the moment they were running two miles to every minute. The thought that a puny human hand—a woman's hand, moreover, contrived for the soft offices of love—could stay that grand momentum, seemed wildly absurd; and as Sylvia, under the strange lassitude born of her deadly peril, relaxed her tense muscles and drowsily closed her eyes, she smiled, with a ghastly humor, at the trust of the sleeping passengers in *her*!

She was rudely shaken out of her lethargy as the train struck a slight curve half way down the grade. The locomotive shied like a frightened steed, and shook in every iron muscle. The flanges shrieked against the rails, the cab swayed and cracked, and the very earth seemed to tremble. For a mo-

ment the startled girl was sure they were upon the ties, or at least had lost a wheel. But it was only the terrible momentum lifting them momentarily from the track, and in a few seconds—though every second meant 150 feet—the fire-eating behemoth righted itself. Yet its beautiful equilibrium was gone; and, as if abandoning itself to its driver's mad mood, the engine rolled and pitched, and rose and fell, like a waterlogged vessel in a storm. The bell, catching the motion, began to toll; and the dolorous sound, twisted into weird discord by the gale, fell upon the ears of the pallid engineer and fireman like the notes of a storm-tossed bell-buoy sounding the knell of the doomed.

The young fireman, who up to this time had maintained a stoical calm, suddenly sprang to the floor of the cab, with a face torn by superstitious fear.

"What if she leaves the rails!" he cried.

But instantly recovering himself, he sprang back to his seat, with the blood of shame on his cheeks.

"Am I running too fast?" shouted Sylvia.

"Not when we're behind time!" he doggedly shouted back.

As the track became smoother, the engine grew calmer; but its barred tongue licked up the flying space for many a mile before the momentum of that perilous descent was lost. As the roar of their passage over the long bridge spanning the Mattunk, twenty miles from Stockton, died away, the fireman called out cheerily:

"On time, madam!"

His voice reached Sylvia's swimming ears faint and distant as she nodded dizzily on her seat, bracing herself against the reverse-lever.

Meanwhile, in the general superintendent's private car, at the extreme rear of the train, a party of men still sat up, smoking their Havanas and sipping their wine. One member of this party was the "big gun" mentioned to Sylvia by the general superintendent—the president of the Mississippi Valley, Omaha, and Western Railway. He was a large man, with luxuriant, snow-white hair; and, though his face was benevolent, even paternal, every line of it betrayed

the inflexible will which had lifted its owner from the roof of a freight car to the presidential chair of a great road.

Mr. Howard, the general superintendent, was regaling the party with an account of his experience in securing a substitute engineer at Valley Junction. For reasons afterward divulged, he suppressed, though, the most startling feature of his story; namely, the sex of the engine-runner he had secured. But he compensated his hearers for this omission with a most dramatic account of the heroism of the sick man, whom he unblushingly represented as having risen from his bed and taken charge of the engine.

Mr. Staniford, the distinguished guest, listened quietly until Howard was done. "Charlie, you are a heartless wretch," he observed, smiling; and when Howard protested, with a twinkle in his eye, that there was no other way, the president added: "If it had been on my road, I should have held the train all night rather than drag a sick man from his bed."

"We all know how many trains are held all night on your road, Staniford," answered

Howard, laughing. "Do you happen to remember the story of an ambitious young engineer who picked himself up out of a wreck with a broken arm, and stepped into a new engine, and pulled his train through to the end of the run?" he asked significantly.

"I was young then and working for glory, and no superintendent ordered me to do it, or I should probably have refused," added Staniford, good-naturedly. He added soberly: "These engineers are a heroic set, and, Charlie, sometimes I think we don't always do them justice."

"I'll do this one justice," answered Howard, warmly.

The party dropped off to bed, one by one. The general superintendent himself finally rose and looked at his watch. As he turned and made his way forward, his careless expression gave way to one of concern. His mind was evidently on the gentle engine-runner. Possibly he had recurring doubts of her skill and courage; but perhaps the fact that he had daughters of his own gave his thought, as much as anything else, a graver turn. Three cars ahead he met the con-

ductor, who also seemed a little nervous, and they talked together for some moments. The train, at the time, was snapping around the choppy curves in the Tallahula Hills like the flash of a whip, and the two men had difficulty in keeping their feet.

"Fast, but not too fast, Dackins," observed the superintendent, half inquiringly.

"What I call a high safety," answered the conductor.

"But fearful in the cab, eh?"

"Nothing equal to it, sir," rejoined Dackins, dryly.

Howard started back toward the private car about the time the train struck Beech-tree Hill. He paused in a vestibule, opened the door, and laid his practised ear to the din outside. Then he gently closed the door, as if to slam it might break the spell, and complacently smiled. When the train reached the level of Barren Plains, and the sleepers ceased their swaying and settled down to a smooth, straightaway motion—that sure annunciator of high speed—the superintendent rubbed his palms together very much like a man shaking hands with himself. When he

got back to his car, he found Mr. Staniford still up, smoking, and leaning back in the luxurious seat with half-closed eyes. Staniford motioned Howard to sit down beside him, and laid his hand familiarly on the latter's knee.

"Confound you, Charlie, you've got that sick engineer on my heart, with your inflammatory descriptions, for which you probably drew largely on your imagination. I have been sitting here thinking about him. Confess, now, that you exaggerated matters a little."

The superintendent chuckled like a man who knows a thing or two, if he only chose to tell. "Well, I did, in one respect; but in another I fell short." He paused for effect, and then continued exultingly: "Staniford, I've got the best railroad story to give the papers that has been brought out in years, and if I don't get several thousand dollars' worth of free advertising out of it, my name isn't C. W. Howard. The best of it is, it's the gospel truth."

"Let's have it," said Staniford, smiling.

"Well, between you and me, that man

Fox was a mighty sick man—too sick to hold his head up, in fact.” Howard paused inquiringly as Staniford turned sharply, and gave him a glance.

“Fox, did you say?” asked Staniford. “What’s his first name?”

“I don’t know. He’s a tall, smooth-faced man, with dark hair and eyes. Rather intelligent-looking. What do you know about him? He’s a comparatively new man with us.”

The old man’s fingers trembled slightly as he flicked the ashes from his cigar. “I don’t know that I know him,” he answered, in a constrained tone. “If he’s the man I have in mind, he’s all right. Go on.”

“Ever run on your road?” inquired Howard, deliberately.

“Yes, yes. But that has nothing to do with it,” returned Staniford, with strange impatience. “Go on.”

“Well,” continued the superintendent, with a mildly curious glance at his companion, “he was altogether too sick to pull a plug. But it seems that his wife has been

in the habit of riding with him, and knows the road and an engine as well as he does. To come to the point—and this is my story, which I didn't tell the boys for the sake of their nerves," he added, with sparkling eyes—"the 'Overland' at this moment is in the hands of a girl, sir—Fox's wife!"

It seemed a long time before either man spoke again. Howard stared in blank amazement at the pallid face of the president, unable to understand the old rail-roader's agitation, and unwilling to attribute it to fear from being in the hands of an engineer who might lose her head. Then Staniford took the other's hand, and held it in an iron grip.

"Charlie, it's my own little baby girl!" he said, huskily.

Howard was familiar with the story of the elopement of Staniford's daughter with one of the M. V., O., and W. engineers, and the situation flashed over him in an instant. After a moment—during which, as he afterward confessed, he could not keep his mind off the added sensation this new fact would

give his advertising story—he said enthusiastically: “She’s a heroine, Staniford, and worthy of her father!”

During the perilous descent of Four Mile Creek, the private car rocked like a cradle, and cracked and snapped in every point. Staniford clung helplessly to Howard’s hand, with the tears trickling down his cheeks. When the bottom was at last reached and the danger was over—the danger at the front—the president drew his handkerchief and wiped the great drops of sweat from his brow. The ex-engineer knew the agony through which his child had passed.

The operator at Valley Junction had flashed the news along the wire, and when the “Overland” steamed up to the union depot in Stockton, at 1:07, twenty seconds ahead of time, a curious and enthusiastic throng of lay-over passengers and railroad men pressed around the engine. When Sylvia appeared in the gangway, her glorious sun-kissed hair glistening with melted snow, and her pale face streaked with soot, the

generous crowd burst into yells of applause. The husky old veteran runner who was to take the girl's place stepped forward, by virtue of his office, as it were, and lifted Sylvia down. For a moment she reeled, partly from faintness, partly from the sickness caused by the pitching of the locomotive. Then she saw pushing unceremoniously through the throng the general superintendent and—she started and looked again—her father!

When President Staniford, struggling to control his emotion, clasped his daughter to his bosom, her overstrained nerves gave way under the double excitement; and, laying her head wearily upon his shoulder, and with her hands upon his neck, she began to cry in a choked, pitiful little way. "Oh, papa, call me your dear little red-head once more!" she sobbed.